

THEIR WONDER YEARS: FALL 98

Chapter 8: Cultural Crossroads

Tyrel had left earlier with vague promises of “hitting the gym and scouting frat recon,” which apparently meant lifting a dumbbell once and flirting with two girls named Brittany. That left Jorge and Bharath alone, the first quiet moment of the day.

Jorge sat cross-legged on his bed, tying the laces on his sneakers with mechanical focus. Across the room, Bharath was standing at his tiny wardrobe, trying in vain to flatten out the creases from his one “semi-formal” shirt - a sky-blue short-sleeve with a button collar that looked like it had fought valiantly in the suitcase wars.

“So,” Bharath asked, glancing back, “you’re Korean... but also Bolivian?”

“Technically, yeah,” Jorge said, not looking up. “My grandparents were born in Busan. Then moved to La Paz a couple generations ago. I was born there. Spanish is my first language. My Korean’s... eh. I don’t even like kimchi unless it’s my halmeoni’s recipe.”

“Your what?”

“Grandma. She’s the only one who still talks about Korea like it’s home. Everyone else is just... Bolivian now. We eat rice with everything, but my mom also makes killer empanadas.”

Bharath grinned, folding his shirt with theatrical precision. “So you’re the only Korean I’ve met who’s never actually been to Korea?”

Jorge laughed. “Yup. I’m a fake Korean. And trust me - the Korean kids here will definitely remind me.”

“Same,” Bharath muttered, flopping onto his bunk with a huff. “I’m a full-on Indian boy - Tamil, raised in Chennai, grew up on Carnatic music and cricket - but we have issues between the different states in India as well. India is more like a continent than just one country. Apparently, the Indian people came here before us think we are different as well.”

Jorge leaned back against the wall. “You mean that mean girl clique? Yeah, I saw it. Those two girls at breakfast? Brutal.”

Bharath sat up, his expression guarded.

Jorge added, "Look, I don't know what her deal is, but that was some class-A snobbery. And that pretty girl just sitting there? Not cool."

Bharath shrugged, but it was the kind that tried too hard to be casual. "I guess I thought she was different."

"They're not worth your time," Jorge said firmly. "You say one sentence with an accent and they act like they've never heard someone pronounce 'schedule' properly."

There was a silence. A companionable one.

Then Jorge said, "You know... we both talk about our families a lot."

Bharath looked over. "Is that a bad thing?"

“No. I think it means we actually *like* where we came from. My mom still calls me twice a day. Thinks I’m gonna get scurvy or something without her cooking.”

Bharath chuckled. “My amma packed a whole stash of snacks. Homemade murukku. Like a covert operation in my luggage.”

Jorge grinned. “My halmeoni snuck chili paste packets in mine. She thinks American food is poison.”

They both paused. Then broke into matching grins.

Despite the languages, continents, and cultures, the threads were there - food as love, parents as lifelines, relatives with unsolicited opinions, and that quiet ache of home wrapped in tinfoil and bubble wrap.

“You know,” Bharath said, stretching, “I used to think South Americans were all about football and samba. Like that Lambada song”

“That’s Brazilian hermano. But I understand. I used to think Indians meditated under waterfalls and ate only spice,” Jorge said.

“We do.”

They laughed.

By 5:30 p.m., both were dressed and ready - Jorge in a dark button-down and sneakers, Bharath in a lovely new shirt, hair combed within an inch of its life.

They stood outside Smith Hall, waiting at the foot of the stairs, the sky above now painted in soft peach and lavender.

The walk to the Student Center wasn't long, but to Bharath, it felt like stepping into a new test. One he wasn't sure he was ready for - not academically, but socially. Personally.

He looked at Jorge, who was fiddling with his digital watch like it was a Rubik's Cube.

“You ready?”

Jorge smiled. "Let's roll."

Side by side, they walked into the golden light, heading toward the low thrum of music, the chatter of unfamiliar voices, and the first real chapter of their American life.

The International Student Orientation was... surprisingly nice.

Sure, the room was packed. And yes, once again, it was at least three-fourths men. The buzz of thick accents bouncing off the cafeteria walls sounded like a sonic map of the globe - Chinese, Arabic, Spanish, Russian, Hindi, Tagalog - and the occasional desperate attempt at humor from an overworked graduate student hosting the evening.

But somehow, Bharath found himself easing into it.

The abundance of Indian students meant that he didn't feel like an alien. If anything, it was a miniature India inside the student center - boys from Mumbai talking cricket scores, a few girls from Hyderabad already whispering in Telugu, someone from Coimbatore handing out banana chips like business cards.

Jorge, though, looked less certain.

He lingered close to Bharath, shoulders stiff, eyes scanning the room like he wasn't sure where to land.

Bharath nudged him gently. "Hey. Stick with me."

Jorge managed a grateful half-smile.

When they were asked to form small groups for an icebreaker game called '*Cultural Criss-Cross*', Bharath made sure Jorge was always within arm's reach. When introductions came around, he spoke up quickly.

"This is Jorge," he said, patting his friend on the back. "He's from Bolivia. And yes, it's pronounced *Hor-hay*. In Spanish, 'J' becomes 'H' - don't ask why."

That line, repeated three times through the night, always got a laugh. It helped. Jorge warmed up.

Even Ravi - who found them by the refreshment table, sipping from a paper cup of mango juice - picked up the rhythm easily.

“Dude,” Ravi said after being introduced. “You have to teach me Spanish curse words. For science.”

Jorge grinned. “Deal.”

The three of them sat together through the rest of the orientation, making sarcastic comments during the “diversity pledge” video and rating the snacks provided by the catering team (“Too American,” “Too potato,” “Still better than pizza”).

But not everything was easy.

At one point, Jorge wandered over to a group of Korean students seated near the wall - drawn perhaps by some vague idea of cultural kinship. Bharath watched from across the room.

It didn’t go well.

He saw the nods, the polite smiles, and then the slow disconnection. Someone asked Jorge something in Korean - probably basic - and Jorge shook his head. Another student frowned. Someone laughed lightly. One girl said something softly that made Jorge's ears turn red.

He came back five minutes later, quieter.

"They didn't really vibe?" Ravi asked under his breath.

"They wanted me to say something in Korean," Jorge muttered. "I told them I didn't speak it. One guy looked at me like I said I hated my ancestors."

Bharath winced. "Screw them. You're Bolivian. Korean by face, maybe. But culture is family."

"I don't even use chopsticks," Jorge said, trying to laugh.

"Neither do I," Bharath said. "Unless it's for instant noodles. Or poking holes in Tetra Pak juice boxes."

Jorge looked between them and smiled, sheepish but steady.

Then he stood.

“Screw it. I’m becoming *desi* tonight.”

Ravi held up a finger. “Only if you agree that paneer is better than tofu.”

“I don’t know what paneer is,” Jorge said.

“You will.”

As the orientation ended, the three of them walked out together into the cooling Atlanta evening, flyers in hand and samosa crumbs in their pockets. The Indian Students’ Association meeting was just next door in the campus multipurpose hall, already pulsing with Bollywood music and the unmistakable scent of cumin and curry leaves.

Bharath looked around at the crowd.

He was still figuring out who he was in this new place. Still adjusting to accents, codes, rituals he hadn't expected.

The multipurpose hall at the Georgia Tech student center was *packed*.

Bharath had expected a roomful of Indian students, sure - maybe fifty, tops. A couple of kids from Gujarat, a few from Tamil Nadu, a smattering of US-born desis looking mildly embarrassed at being dragged to a "cultural" event.

What he had *not* expected was this.

A sea of brown.

There had to be at least two hundred people, maybe more. Loud laughter, bright kurtas, faded jeans, jangling bangles, Timberlands and juttis, bindis and baseball caps, all coexisting in what looked like a festive desi street fair had been airlifted into a university building.

The smell of samosas, ketchup, and talcum powder filled the air. Bollywood music blared from cheap speakers. Someone was already dancing in a corner. Someone else was adjusting the mic stand for a welcome speech.

Jorge stopped dead in his tracks.

“Dios mío. Is there anyone *not* Indian in this room?”

Ravi grinned. “You, buddy.”

Bharath chuckled, already feeling that familiar weird warmth of seeing *his people* en masse in a foreign land.

Jorge added, “There’s so many of you! You should’ve told me this was your secret headquarters.”

Bharath and Ravi exchanged a glance.

Then both of them punched him on either shoulder.

“Welcome to the mothership,” Bharath said with a grin.

But the longer they stood there, the more Bharath began to notice... things.

Groups. Clusters. Cliques.

Not based on region - or not entirely - but something more nebulous. A strange social ecosystem.

The U.S.-born desi kids in their hoodies and sneakers stuck together, tossing around slang like “yo” and “real talk.” The well-dressed FOBs - mostly from Delhi, Bangalore, and Bombay - were gathered near the center, speaking a blend of accented English and regional phrases, confidently holding court. The South Indian kids were slightly more reserved, hovering near the food table. And then there were the studious types in the corner, clutching their plates like shields, watching everything silently.

Even here - even among *his own*
- Bharath felt like a bit of an outsider.

“I’ve never seen this at home,” Ravi muttered, echoing his thoughts.

“Everyone’s in *groups*.”

“And no one talks to strangers,” Jorge added, biting into a samosa. “This is like a high school cafeteria on steroids.”

Bharath nodded slowly.

Then his eyes landed on her again.

Ayesha

Even though he knew by now that she was not worth it, it didn’t stop his heart from skipping once as it flipped, and thudded against his ribs.

She stood near the center of the hall, laughing at something one of the guys beside her said. Her hair was braided over one shoulder, and she wore a deep green kurti with a matching dupatta thrown over her jeans. The outfit was simple - but on her, it looked radiant.

She looked confident. Effortless. Electric.

And utterly *untouchable*.

She and that rude girl from earlier were surrounded - not just by guys, though there were plenty of those - but also by other girls. Most of them were clearly upperclassmen, judging by the way they laughed a little louder, stood a little straighter, and surveyed the crowd like they were used to being admired.

She still looked perfectly judgmental.

Ravi elbowed him. "Oh no. You're looking at her again."

Jorge leaned in. "Is this the girl who waved at you across the dining hall?"

"The same," Bharath said quietly.

"She's... wow," Ravi admitted.

“I get it now,” Jorge added, popping the rest of the samosa in his mouth.

“Yeah, man. She’s... like a Nescafé ad come to life.”

“More like *Kaajal* ad,” Ravi countered.

They both looked at Bharath.

“You dead?” Jorge asked.

“Internally, yes,” Bharath said.

He gathered his courage. Took a step forward.

Ayesha caught his eye from across the room.

For a brief second - something passed between them. Recognition. Memory. Maybe even curiosity.

He raised his hand, halfway to a wave.

But then - she turned.

Pointedly.

Without a word.

Without a smile.

Just pivoted back to her group as though she hadn't seen him at all.

He stood frozen for a second, his hand awkwardly mid-air, then dropped it to his side.

Ravi winced. "Oof."

Jorge made a face. "Cold."

Bharath didn't say anything.

He didn't need to.

His silence said everything.